Jeremy Martin, *Modding the Game*
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Paul Slocum

Modding the game

BY JEREMY MARTIN

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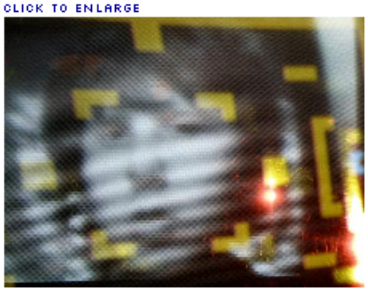

Outside of erotic *WarGames* fan fiction, the phrases "ménage à trois" and "dot matrix printer" don't appear next to each other often. The semidisturbingly titled panel Game Perverts: A Robot, a DS, and a Dot Matrix Printer Ménage à Trois probably won't deliver the sweet appliance-on-appliance action its title promises, but scheduled panelist Paul Slocum knows a few tricks that will make that Eighties office artifact look a lot sexier.

Slocum, who modifies old computers, printers, and gaming consoles to produce both music and visual-art projects, started out programming his own 2600 games. A *Marble Madness*-type cartridge he designed is available through his Web site, **www.qotile.net**. Before he received a cease-and-desist letter from Atari, you could also purchase what surely qualifies as the nerdiest non-*Battlestar Galactica*-related thing anyone's ever done, ever: a *Berserk* cartridge with the soundtrack modified to blip "Mr. Roboto."

"I think it's really interesting to see what all you can do with what's basically a one-bit sound chip," Slocum says. As half of the band Tree Wave, he spends almost as much time modding printer firmware and coaxing notes out of the 2600's sound card as he does writing music, but the resulting lo-fi krautrock is cool enough to make up for the *Space Invaders* flashbacks it induces. Listening to the versatile and interesting sounds Slocum has managed to pull from these obsolete machines, you realize two things: 1) The Atari could've survived the Nineties by marketing the 2600 as the world's cheapest synthesizer, and 2) dot-matrix-printer music is exactly the type of shit Brian Eno would've been into if he grew up watching *Captain N*.

But hacking old tech is no easy route to rock stardom. Slocum is not only a traditional musician – capable of playing more vanilla instruments like the guitar and keyboard – he's also got a computer-science degree from the University of Texas in Dallas. And all that programming leaves him with little time for next-gen gaming. He's got a Wii but no time to play it – a sacrifice many gamers aren't willing to make. "New people are coming in [the programming community], and other people are dropping out all the time. It's really pretty difficult to do. ... There are a lot of unfinished games out there."

Not only can cartridges be modified to run preprogrammed sound loops and some trippy accompanying videos; via hacking, Atari games can also produce notes for various joystick movements, allowing Slocum to play the machine as a musical instrument.

Who knew reprogramming obsolete technology could be so freaking cool? Contrary to the intentions of Atari, and probably the laws of God himself, Slocum's rock-star gaming mods might provide an alternate-reality scenario in which your 2600 skills would actually help you get laid. Domo arigato, Mr. Roboto, indeed.